

SHORT NOTE

GERARD CARRUTHERS AND GEORGE SMITH

Alexander Wilson's Manuscript Notebook: A Scottish Poet in America, 1801–1803

Abstract

Alexander Wilson the Paisley Poet compiled a notebook towards a collection of his poems during his later life in America. It is a combination of print and manuscript material and is here described for the first time.

Glasgow University Library has recently acquired a manuscript notebook by Paisley poet-in-exile, Alexander Wilson (1766–1813). In the notebook he is compiling his American poems and songs both in holograph manuscript and in printed type, in the latter form extracted from newspapers and journals.¹ The notebook, with buff card covers measuring 5 inches (12.7 cm) by 3.5 inches (8.89 cm), contains twenty-six pages, two of which consist of an additional card end-cover. It is bound by buff-coloured thread and is in a fragile but intact state. The notebook was exhibited in Paisley Museum during 1966 to mark the two hundredth anniversary of Wilson's birth and then it came into the possession of a private individual, after which it was acquired by the University of Glasgow's Special Collections. Below we detail the notebook's contents and provide supplementary information about Wilson's life in America during its compilation, circa March 1801 to September 1803. For context, it is useful to highlight Wilson's itinerant lifestyle during the period. After he fled Scotland in 1794 under threat of prosecution for libel, Wilson moved around frequently till 1796, when he settled in as a schoolmaster in Milestown, Pennsylvania. In early summer 1801, following a scandal, he left Milestown and relocated to Bloomfield, a settlement north of Newark around twelve miles from New York.² Once more, he took a teaching post but was far from happy with his situation

and departed Bloomfield in February of 1802 to take a post at Union School in Kingessing Township, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which began on 25 February.³ The notebook contains poetry composed and published while Wilson resided in each of these three communities, and opens with a poem first published in Newark.

On the inside front board there is a handwritten inscription, though not in Wilson's hand. It reads: 'Received Sept. 24. 1803.' Wilson often sent materials back to his sister Jean in Scotland for safe-keeping during this period and the docketing may be hers. There are two loose fragments of a letter dated 23 May 1817 between the front cover and the notebook's first page. The extant text mentions 'Alexander', 'Grissel' and 'sister Marion'; obviously it is not in the hand of the deceased Wilson. The notebook's first page carries the holograph inscription in Wilson's typically artistic hand: 'Alex Wilson, July 8th. 1802, Kingessing Township, Union School'. Wilson's move to Kingessing was to turn out hugely significant as it was here that he met William Bartram (1739–1823), the natural historian and writer, who would mentor Wilson and inspire him to begin his work on the multi-volume *American Ornithology* (1808–14), one of the foundational texts of American natural history. Wilson is sometimes perceived to have switched his central sensibility from poet to natural historian in America. However, in a letter to his friend Charles Orr, dated 15 July 1802, one week after he had inscribed the notebook, Wilson wrote:

I have a variety of resources in times of irritation and perplexity, but in none have I found consolation as in renewing my pursuit of the Muses. My harp is new strung and my soul glows with more ardour than ever to emulate those immortal bards who have gone before me.⁴

In the same letter Wilson tells Orr:

I have also collected all of my productions since '94; these I intend to polish and improve occasionally, and to add to them all those contained in my last edition which I think meritorious, and to copy the whole when corrected to my mind in one volume.⁵

The notebook now at Glasgow seems to be the main volume of his corrected poems, collecting together writing since he has arrived in Pennsylvania in

1794. Wilson utilised more than one notebook throughout this period and he may have physically extracted manuscript from at least one other compilation before re-assembling material in this notebook. The physical make-up of the notebook and particularly the numbering of the pages provide further supporting evidence of this proposition to which we will return below.

The four poems that come first in the notebook are all typeset, rather than being in manuscript. The first of these is a print work, titled, 'My Landlady's Nose' and immediately above the title is a note showing the newspaper where it appeared: 'For The Centinel' and beneath the subtitle specifies the air to which it was written 'A song – Tune "The Bonny Muir Hen"'. 'My Landlady's Nose' is pasted into the notebook (pp. 2–3). The text was first published on 24 August 1801 in the *Centinel of Freedom* (sometimes also with its title iterated as the *Newark Centinel* or the *Sentinel of Freedom* through its run, 1796 to 1823).⁶ Immediately underneath the *Centinel* printing, Wilson has placed an advertisement offering a reward for the safe return of another pocket notebook, containing among other things a manuscript version of the same poem. This is a volume, as the advert tells us, he had recently lost somewhere on the road 'from Newark to Orange Dale and Bloomfield'. The piece that follows (pp. 3–5), is also in print: 'The Aristocrat's War-Whoop/Addressed to all despairing Tories./Tune – "The Morgan Rattler."' This was published in *The Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, NJ), 29 September 1801, and in *Constitutional Telegraphe* [sic] (Boston, MA), 7 October 1801. However, it is one of Wilson's earliest American pieces written while he lived in Milestown. The poem is written in the lead up to the American election of 1800, contested by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, and reflects the feelings of many Jeffersonian Republicans, who were viscerally critical of Adams and the Federalist Party. The third printed text pasted in (pp. 6–7), is 'Prayer Addressed to Jove, the God of Thunder, during the late Hot Weather.' It was first published on 22 September 1801 in the 'Newark Centinel', whilst Wilson resided in Bloomfield.⁷ The final printed text pasted into the notebook is 'The Dominie' (pp. 8–9). We have been unable to find a source for and date of original publication. Ziser is of the opinion that it is from the Milestown period, 1796–1801, whereas Burt and Davis believe that it was written while Wilson resided in Kingessing, from 1802.⁸

From p. 9 onwards the notebook changes from print to manuscript.

This presumably signals the supplementing of already published work with new work (though some at least of the poems in manuscript had already appeared in print). Wilson's earliest American poetry was published while he was a resident of Milestown, and the first holograph manuscript piece to appear in the notebook concerns another event of great national importance during this period. 'A Dirge/Tune *Roslin Castle*' (pp. 9–10) laments the death of America's first president, George Washington, on 14 December 1799. It was first published in 1799 but was widely published in American newspapers in 1800 an election year.⁹ The next manuscript is 'Deacon Grumbo/The Miller/A New Song/ 'Tune "Dear Kathleen &c"' (pp. 11–14 of the notebook, though independently numbered, '1–4'). 'Deacon Grumbo' is signed by Wilson and dated, Nov. 1. 1801, within the Bloomfield period of Wilson's residence. This may suggest that the *Centinel of Freedom* (the 'Newark Centinel') as a possible source of publication, but as of yet we have been unable to verify this (since no extant run of the paper is complete) or date of first publication anywhere else. 'Bloomfield/Tune "My soger Laddie"' appears next across pp. 15–17, but labelled '11', '12' and '13', suggesting that the previous item had been inserted here after the pages were first numbered. When the piece was completed is unclear as it is undated, but the text was evidently underway in August 1801. In another letter to Charles Orr dated, 7 August 1801, where Wilson attacks 'canting Presbyterians' in Bloomfield, an early version of the satire containing six stanzas of four lines is included.¹⁰ However, the manuscript version in the notebook consists of five stanzas, each of eight lines. Would Wilson have been courageous enough to have had the piece published in the 'Newark Centinel' whilst resident in Bloomfield or would his previous experience of publishing potentially incendiary poetry in Paisley have left him more cautious? Questions of this kind, involving both cultural and publishing history, arise frequently in exploring Wilson's American writing, but the sources for researching them are often incomplete and widely dispersed.

The penultimate poem in the notebook, pp. 17–23, numbered continuously with 'Bloomfield' (pp. 11–13), by Wilson, and so pp. 14–19, is 'Jefferson & Liberty/A Patriotic Song/For March 4th 1801/ Tune "Vive la souverain People"'. Wilson's text was published – although with the 'Air' indicated as 'Willie was a wanton wag' – in the *Aurora Magazine* of 24 January 1801, and subsequently published in other periodicals during the same year.¹¹ It is well documented that Wilson addressed a large gathering of

Milestown's citizenry celebrating Jefferson's inauguration with his 'Oration/ on the power and value of National Liberty', also widely published in the American press during 1801. It is a possibility that the manuscript version of 'Jefferson and Liberty' inscribed 'For March 4th 1801', may also have been performed by Wilson at the event to celebrate the third president of America coming into office. Interestingly too, a printed version of the song, extracted from a contemporary newspaper, survives in one of President Jefferson's scrapbooks, in which he was collecting American poetry of the day.¹²

On p. 24 of the notebook there is a handwritten inscription, which reads: 'Alex Wilson, Milestown, March 7th 1801.' Clearly again, we can note that Wilson was cobbling this notebook together from different sources, since this inscription pre-dates the inscription at the front of the notebook (which reads 'July 8th 1802').

The final item in the notebook is 'Absence', a printed anecdote about Isaac Newton pasted onto the inside of the end card cover ('p. 25' verso; with the recto of this inside card cover, 'p. 26' blank). The anecdote's authorship and origin are unknown but it appears in later decades in the nineteenth century in slightly different form in the popular *Joe Miller's Jest Book* (the pasting may be an accretion at some point when the notebook is back in Paisley).¹³

All of the texts contained within the notebook, with the exception of 'Absence' are collected in Alexander B. Grosart's *The Poems and Miscellaneous Prose of Alexander Wilson* (1876).¹⁴ Grosart clearly had access to the Glasgow University notebook while compiling his edition; his section 'Poems Hitherto Uncollected, or for the First Time Printed' contains 'Bloomfield', 'The Aristocrat's War-Whoop', 'Deacon Grumbo' and 'The Dominie'. Grosart provides, however, only very limited and almost casual annotation on the poems. The recent reawakening of scholarly interest in Wilson, and, indeed, the growing field of 'Trans-Atlantic Study' point to an urgency for the examination of Wilson's American literary career. As a political poet in the early American Republic as much as in Scotland prior to 1794, we need new bibliographical examination of these American works followed by a proper critical disinterment.¹⁵ Wilson is an important Paisley and Scottish poet, who will likely have much attention paid to him around 2021 (whether or not Paisley succeeds in its bid for UK City of Culture for that year). As the Glasgow notebook testifies, he is also a Scottish writer of international significance.

Notes

- 1 Glasgow University Library: MS Gen 949.
- 2 Clark Hunter (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), p. 181.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 192–93.
- 4 Ibid., p. 191.
- 5 Ibid., p. 193.
- 6 M. Ziser, Introduction to *Alexander Wilson, Poems, Literary Prose, and Journalism*. Early Americas Digital Archives (2002), mith.umd.edu/eada/gateway/wilson/intro.php, accessed 17 February 2017; ‘My Landlady’s Nose’ was subsequently published in a periodical called, *The Museum*: see *The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson*, p. 189.
- 7 See Ziser, Introduction to *Alexander Wilson, Poems, Literary Prose, and Journalism*.
- 8 See Ziser, Introduction to *Alexander Wilson, Poems, Literary Prose, and Journalism*; & E. H. Burtt and W. E. Davis, *Alexander Wilson: The Scot Who Founded American Ornithology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).
- 9 E. H. Burtt and W. E. Davis, *Alexander Wilson: The Scot Who Founded American Ornithology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2013), p. 28.
- 10 *The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson*, p. 187.
- 11 See Irving N. Rothman, ‘Verses from America’ in E. H. Burtt Jr (ed.), *Alexander Wilson, Enlightened Naturalist* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016), pp. 24–90, see p. 65. ‘Jefferson and Liberty’ was also published as follows: *Herald of Liberty*, IV:159 (Washington, PA), 23 February 1801, p. 4; *American Mercury*, XVII: 872 (Hartford, CT); 19 March 1801, p. 2. and republished by request, just in time for July 4 celebrations, as “the much-admired song . . . replete with sublime and just sentiments,” in *American Mercury*, July 1 1801, p. 3; and *The Constitutional Telegraph* (Boston, MA, March 3, 1801, p. 4. The song, attributed to “some rhyming democrat,” with “little rhyme and less reason,” with “the appropriate tune of Willie is a wanton wag,” is critiqued in *The Balance and Columbia Repository* (Hudson, NY), 30 April 1805, p. 138. It is also recorded as sung at a political event in *American Mercury*, 27 August 1801, p. 3; and at a dinner of the Hibernian Provident Society of New York, reported in *Republican Watch-Tower* (New York, NY), 23 March 1803, p. 4.
- 12 J. Gross (ed.), *Thomas Jefferson’s Scrapbooks: Poems of Nation, Family and Romantic Love Collected by America’s Third President*, First Edition (Hanover. Steerforth Press, 2006).
- 13 See *Joe Miller’s Jest Book* (Joseph Smith: London, 1826)
- 14 A. B. Grosart (ed.), *The Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson, the American Ornithologist*, ‘For the first time fully collected and compared with the original and early editions, mss., etc’ by Wilson, Alexander, 1766–1813’ (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1876).
- 15 See Rothman in n.12 above for the beginnings of a nice account of Wilson’s American poetic career.

University of Glasgow